

Yom Kippur 5783
Honoring Parents is Not for Kids
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Gmar Hatimah Tovah.

A game of catch.

I grew up playing catch with my Dad whenever I could. Sometimes we talked as we threw, usually about baseball. But other times we didn't, and it was still priceless. If you grew up playing catch with your Dad or your Mom, then you know what this is like. It's not just a physical game, but an emotional connection.

Maybe that's why my eyes get moist when I watch the end of "Field of Dreams." That 1989 movie classic ranks toward the top of so many best sports films lists. Why is that? I think that last scene of father and son playing catch together is a big part of it. It's not just *them* playing catch; it feels like us doing it with our parents too.

When I saw this as a kid, I understood what the movie was about: baseball. Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, builds a picturesque baseball field in his backyard, an Iowa cornfield.

Years later, I saw it again as an adult, and then I *really* understood what it was about: father and son. And baseball was the only thing they shared in common. It's why the last scene shows them together in the only way they know how - playing a game of catch in front of the setting sun. "Maybe this is heaven"- even if it's Iowa.

This wise film works on two levels. It showcases one particular theme to younger people - baseball - and it works. And it touches on a second idea to adults - relationship with parents - and it works equally well. The same movie works on two distinct levels, lower and higher. I distinctly remember the moment I grasped the second level, the moment the light bulb went off.

Many of us relate to "Field of Dreams" not because we have a baseball diamond in our backyard, but because we too have relationships with our own parents - sometimes complicated, but always important.

If Field of Dreams is really about baseball, the Torah doesn't have much to say. But if the film is ultimately about parents, the Jewish tradition has lots to say. Here too it expects us to make a similar shift in perspective from child to adult.

Parashat Kedoshim of Leviticus opens: "*Kdoshim Tihyu Ki Kadosh Ani Hashem Elokeichem. Ish Imo VAviv Tira'u*" (Lv. 19:2,3).

We are familiar with the famous verse: "You shall be holy for I Hashem your G-d am holy." And what's the very first instruction that follows? "Everybody, you must each revere your mother and father." In other words, you want to be holy? Revere your parents. Holiness begins at home.

This Mitzvah reminds us of another well-known verse about parents: "*Kabed et Aviha V'et Imecha*, Honor your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12). That's from the Ten Commandments.

Revere your parents. Honor your parents. This deep respect for parents leads to holiness because honoring parents is like honoring G-d, for they too are our creators.

Today I'm speaking about honoring parents. While the Torah's message is clear, the reality is that relationships are not always as positive as the Torah hopes. I recognize that we all have different relationships with our parents: some of our parents are or were role models, and are or were worthy of the honor the Torah calls for; while other parents do or did things that were blatantly wrong and are not deserving of honor and respect; some of our parents are alive and well, others are declining, and yet others are no longer living. I'm not pretending we all have or had perfect parents, but today I'm sharing what the Jewish tradition says about the subject of parents as a whole. One reason is because, in my eyes, many of us in the room have parents worthy of honor. Second, the pandemic has changed things when it comes to relationships with our parents. And finally, while the Torah uses the language of honoring parents specifically, I think this positive teaching applies to other adults in our lives and community, not just our parents per se. Grandparents, neighbors, Beth El members, friends. Some families we are born into, others we choose. Even if our parents are no longer living, we all have something to learn here because we're part of a community that includes people older than us and deserve our honor and respect.

As a child, I knew what it meant to honor my parents; at least I thought I did:
Listen to Mom and Dad.
Keep my room clean(ish).
Keep the toilet seat down.

Don't complain about the menu.

Clear the table.

Don't embarrass Mom or Dad.

Limit the "Are we there yet?" from the back seat.

At the end of a long day, when they sit down to watch TV for a few minutes, let them watch what *they* want. (My kids, you hear that?)

Some of these really felt like sacrifices. But what did I know? I was in grade school. But as a child this was the path for me to keep this Mitzvah. Sometimes challenging but always doable.

But while I was in rabbinical school I encountered a different path; I learned how the Talmud defines what it means to revere and honor one's parents.

It says *revering* parents means to not sit in their place, not contradict them, and not argue them down (Kiddushin 31b). In other words, each of us must check our contrarian urge to prove our parents wrong, assuming they are not in fact wrong.

The Talmud then defines how to *honor* parents: to offer them food and drink; to help them get dressed; to provide a place to live; and to help them walk in and out.

In short, to provide them with life's necessities.

At first I was totally confused: children don't provide life's basics to their parents like food, clothing, and shelter; it's the reverse! That's the stuff *parents* do for their kids. Then I shifted my perspective, like seeing "Field of Dreams" as an adult. The Talmud understands that the Mitzvah of honoring one's parents is *not* given to little kids at all. It's given to *adult* children taking care of their *aging* parents. When aging parents need help eating, drinking, dressing, finding a suitable living arrangement, and being mobile - *that's* when their adult children must step in.

You may consider - but that's so hard! You of the Sandwich Generation, are not wrong. You are busy sprinting with your own careers and raising your own families. Caring for aging parents is endlessly challenging: physically, emotionally, financially, and time-wise. But it's non-negotiable for the Torah. Simply because they're our parents and they brought us into this world and cared for us when we were unable to do so ourselves.

Only now as a parent do I realize what I subjected my parents to when I was a child.

The serious lack of sleep.

The days and nights spent at home with a sick child.

The constant messes.
The limited social life with friends.
The exorbitant expenses of daycare, school, and babysitters.
The endless worrying and stress.
And more sleepless nights.

Now I know, being a parent is really, really hard. And my kids have no idea at all. None. Some of them are too young to even remember these days.

The most challenging aspect of the Mitzvah of honoring parents may not even involve our hands or our wallets but our tongues. The Talmud teaches that Rabbi Tarfon felt proud of himself for honoring his mother. When she was old, he would serve as her footstep, and he literally crouched down for her to step on his back as she climbed into bed. His colleagues were not the least impressed with this piety. They asked him, “Has your mother ever thrown a purse full of gold coins into the ocean in front of you and you didn’t shame her? If you’ve never been tested in this way, you haven’t come close to fulfilling the Mitzvah of honoring your parents” (Kiddushin 31a). In a word, the ultimate challenge is *patience*. The rabbis challenged Rabbi Tarfon to reach a higher level of respecting parents.

My JTS Talmud Professor Judith Hauptman interprets: “In other words, as hard as it may be to feed and attend regularly to the needs of parents, it is even harder to hold one’s tongue when dealing with a parent who is ‘slipping away.’ Not to *dishonor* parents turns out to be the deeper meaning of the requirement to honor them.”

Again, I reiterate that the Mitzvah of honoring parents, in my eyes, has limits. The Torah’s call for respecting parents is speaking to the majority, not to every last case. For example, those parents who G-d forbid abused their kids are not deserving of their children’s honor.

Moving away from the texts and toward real life, I am inspired by the palpable love and devotion that so many of *you* show toward your own parents. I see this most often when one of your parents is at shul, in the hospital, or rehab. You’re just there with them. You’re present. I know those days are sometimes not easy. I am in awe at how committed you are when your parents need your help. Though you are busy with your own daily tasks, you drop everything to be there with your mom and dad. You are there early in the morning, all day, and late at night. If you can’t be there, you arrange for someone else to be. You do not allow your parents to be alone, to feel alone, to receive anything less than the best medical attention and care.

And in all of your efforts, I see so much love, an unwavering *I-am-always-here-for-you-because-you-were-always-there-for-me* love. I have thought many times, I hope my own children care for me like some of you care for your parents.

It's important for us to know the classic Jewish texts on the subject, which I have shared today. And it's equally important to understand the lived reality of the moment. For insight into caring for today's elderly, I turned to our executive board member Jackie Melinger, who works in the business of arranging for caregivers.

To be clear, we must not treat people in a certain way based on age alone. Ageism is real, and there are *many* older people in our community who are still at their peaks physically and cognitively. At the same time, we see there are others who have declined in some way, and as a caring community, we must respond to these challenges to meet their needs.

Jackie made four points I think are worth sharing today about caring for some of these people:

First, the pandemic significantly limited many people from seeing their parents frequently. Many adult children declined to visit because they justifiably did not want to get their parents sick; but this cost everybody precious time with parents. For many adults, the visits are still not as regular as they used to be. Additionally, some older people have declined physically and emotionally in the last 2 years seemingly at a faster rate than usual. This is in part because some older people were home alone for so long, which took a real toll.

Second, the biggest challenge today for some adult children is staying patient, especially when dealing with an older adult who has a cognitive loss. It's exactly like the Talmud's story I shared of not shaming a parent for throwing gold coins into the ocean. Patience. We are often in a hurry, moving at the speed of our busy lives. But some older people are not, and they need to take their time. It's doubly hard to stay patient with our own parents if they are slowing down, says Jackie, because of course we would rather not accept that they are in decline.

Third, it's helpful to remember that older adults with physical or cognitive impairments live in a different reality, and it's crucial for us to live in *their* reality, not ours. Again, I speak here not about someone's age, because there are many older people who are physically and cognitively sharp. But for those who are limited in some way, we have to adjust ourselves in order to give them the care they need. We must go with what our parents, grandparents, and older friends are capable of *now*, not what they once were.

They may move at a different speed, eat different foods, and talk about different things than they used to. Accept it. Each of us as an adult must change our perspective to accept our parents for who they are at *this* moment. They might have the abilities they had 30 years ago, but they might not. After all, are we the same as we were 30 years ago?

Fourth, there are some things that are made easier by living in 2022. Communication is simpler, and there is ample safety technology to keep people safe in their homes.

Jackie speaks of a friend as someone who exemplifies the Mitzvah of honoring parents. Let's call her Linda. Though her father is declining slightly, Linda always, always, always treats him with respect. This sounds simple, but we know that it's not always easy. She always consults him in decisions about him. She regularly cares for him and visits him. She always includes him in activities that he can participate in. She prepares others in advance for how best to deal with him: Linda tells them to speak slowly, speak loudly, but not to talk down to him. She recognizes that her father is in a different place than he used to be, yet she loves him all the same. Because he was and is her father.

As we enter the year 5783, let's recommit to this Mitzvah as a personal goal for ourselves. When the going gets tough, find the extra motivation in the fact that honoring parents and elders is a Mitzvah, a deed which brings G-d's presence into the world.

Mother's Day and Father's Day are nice but they only fall once a year. For the Torah, revering and honoring parents are everyday responsibilities.

It's never easy to care for aging parents, relatives, or friends. Today, I want to give you *Hizzuk*, strength and encouragement. As difficult as caring for aging parents is, nothing else is more important. Nothing else conveys more love. Nothing else is more holy.

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